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# Food in Chinese Culture

[](http://asiasociety.org/files/chinese_food.jpg)

According to K. C. Chang, the editor of Food in Chinese Culture, few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese.

**by K.C. Chang**

The food style of a culture is certainly first of all determined by the natural resources that are available for its use. . . . It is thus not surprising that Chinese food is above all characterized by an assemblage of plants and animals that grew prosperously in the Chinese land for a long time. A detailed list would be out of place here, and quantitative data are not available. The following enumeration is highly impressionistic:  
 **Starch Staples:** millet, rice, kao-liang, wheat, maize, buckwheat, yam, sweet potato.  
  
**Legumes:** soybean, broad bean, peanut, mung bean.  
  
**Vegetables:** malva, amaranth, Chinese cabbage, mustard green, turnip, radish, mushroom.  
  
**Fruits:** peach, apricot, plum, apple, jujube date, pear, crab apple, mountain haw, longan, litchi, orange.  
  
**Meats:** pork, dog, beef, mutton, venison, chicken, duck, goose, pheasant, many fishes.  
 **Spices:** red pepper, ginger, garlic, spring onion, cinnamon.

Chinese cooking is, in this sense, the manipulation of these foodstuffs as basic ingredients. Since ingredients are not the same everywhere, Chinese food begins to assume a local character simply by virtue of the ingredients it uses. Obviously ingredients are not sufficient for characterization, but they are a good beginning. Compare, for example, the above list with one in which dairy products occupy a prominent place, and one immediately comes upon a significant contrast between the two food traditions.  
  
One important point about the distinctive assemblage of ingredients is its change through history. Concerning food, the Chinese are not nationalistic to the point of resisting imports. In fact, foreign foodstuffs have been readily adopted since the dawn of history. Wheat and sheep and goats were possibly introduced from western Asia in prehistoric times, many fruits and vegetables came in from central Asia during the Han and the T'ang periods, and peanuts and sweet potatoes from coastal traders during the Ming period. These all became integral ingredients of Chinese food. At the same time,. . . milk and dairy products, to this date, have not taken a prominent place in Chinese cuisine.

In the Chinese culture, the whole process of preparing food from raw ingredients to morsels ready for the mouth involves a complex of interrelated variables that is highly distinctive when compared with other food traditions of major magnitude. At the base of this complex is the division between fan, grains and other starch foods, and ts'ai, vegetable and meat dishes. To prepare a balanced meal, it must have an appropriate amount of both rice or noodle product and meat and vegetables, and ingredients are readied along both tracks. Grains are cooked whole or as flour, making up the fan half of the meal in various forms: fan (in the narrow sense, "cooked rice"), steamed wheat-, millet-, or corn-flour bread, ping ("pancakes"), and noodles. Vegetables and meats are cut up and mixed in various ways into individual dishes to constitute the ts'ai half. Even in meals in which the staple starch portion and the meat-and-vegetable portion are apparently joined together, such as in . . . "wonton" . . . they are in fact put together but not mixed up, and each still retains its due proportion and own distinction.

For the preparation of cai, or dishes, the use of multiple ingredients and the mixing of flavors are the rules, which above all means that ingredients are usually cut up and not done whole, and that they are variously combined into individual dishes of vastly differing flavors. Pork for example, may be diced, slice shredded, or ground, and when combined with other meats and with various vegetable ingredients and spice produces dishes of utterly diverge, shapes, flavors, colors, tastes, and aromas.  
  
The parallelism of fan and cai and the above-described principles of cai preparation account for a number (other features of the Chinese food culture, especially in the area of utensil To begin with, there are fan utensils and ts'ai utensils, both for cooking an for serving. In the modem kitchen, fan guo ("rice cooker") and cai kuo ("wok") are very different and as a rule not interchangeable utensils. . . . To prepare the kind of ts'ai that we have characterized, the chopping knife or cleaver and the chopping anvil are standard equipment in every Chinese kitchen, ancient and modern. To sweep the cooked grains into the mouth, and to serve the cut-up morsel of the meat-and vegetable dishes chopsticks have proved more service able than hands or other instruments (such as spoons and forks, the former being used in China alongside the chopsticks).  
  
This complex of interrelated features of Chinese food may be described, for the purpose of shorthand reference, as the Chinese fan-ts'ai principle. Send a Chinese cook into an American kitchen, given Chinese or American ingredients, and he or she will (a) prepare an adequate amount of fan, (b) cut up the ingredients and mix them up in various combinations, and (c) cook the ingredients into several dishes and, perhaps, a soup. Given the right ingredients, the "Chineseness" of the meal would increase, but even with entirely native American ingredients and cooked in American utensils, it is still a Chinese meal.  
The above example shows that the Chinese way of eating is characterized by a notable flexibility and adaptability. Since a cai dish is made of a mixture of ingredients, its distinctive appearance, taste, and flavor do not depend on the exact number of ingredients, nor, in most cases, on any single item. The same is true for a meal, made up of a combination of dishes. In times of affluence, a few more expensive items may be added, but if the times are hard they may be omitted without doing irreparable damage. If the season is not quite right, substitutes may be used. With the basic principles, a Chinese cook can prepare "Chinese" dishes for the poor as well as the rich, in times of scarcity as well as abundance, and even in a foreign country without many familiar ingredients. The Chinese way of cooking must have helped the Chinese people through some hard times throughout their history. And, of course, one may also say that the Chinese cook the way they do because of their need and desire for adaptability.  
  
This adaptability is shown in at least two other features. The first is the amazing knowledge the Chinese have acquired about their wild plant resources. . . . The Chinese peasants apparently know every edible plant in their environment, and plants there are many. Most do not ordinarily belong on the dinner table, but they may be easily adapted for consumption in time of famine. . . . Here again is this flexibility: A smaller number of familiar foodstuffs are used ordinarily, but, if needed, a greater variety of wild plants would be made use of. The knowledge of these "famine plants" was carefully handed down as a living culture -apparently this knowledge was not placed in dead storage too long or too often.  
  
Another feature of Chinese food habits that contributed to their notable adaptability is the large number and great variety of preserved foods. . . . Food is preserved by smoking, salting, sugaring, steeping, pickling, drying, soaking in many kinds of soy sauces, and so forth, and the whole range of foodstuffs is involved-grains, meat, fruit, eggs, vegetables, and everything else. Again, with preserved food, the Chinese people were ever ready in the event of hardship or scarcity.

The Chinese way of eating is further characterized by the ideas and beliefs about food, which actively affect the ways . . . in which food is prepared and taken. The overriding idea about food in China -in all likelihood an idea with solid, but as yet unrevealed, scientific backing-is that the kind and the amount of food one takes is intimately relevant to one's health. Food not only affects health as a matter of general principle, the selection of the right food at any particular time must also be dependent upon one's health condition at that time. Food, therefore, is also medicine. The regulation of diet as a disease preventive or cure is certainly as Western as it is Chinese. Common Western examples are the diet for arthritics and the recent organic food craze. But the Chinese case is distinctive for its underlying principles. The bodily functions, in the Chinese view, follow the basic yin-yang principles. Many foods are also classifiable into those that possess the yin quality and those of the yang quality. When yin and yang forces in the body are not balanced, problems result. Proper amounts of food of one kind or the other may then be administered (i.e., eaten) to counterbalance the yin and yang disequilibrium. If the body is normal, overeating of one kind of food would result in an excess of that force in the body, causing diseases.

At least two other concepts belong to the native Chinese food tradition. One is that, in consuming a meal, appropriate amounts of both fan and ts'ai should be taken. In fact, of the two, fan is the more fundamental and indispensable. . . . The other concept is frugality. Overindulgence in food and drink is a sin of such proportions that dynasties could fall on its account. . . . Although both the fants'ai and the frugality considerations are health based, at least in part they are related to China's traditional poverty in food resources.  
  
Finally, perhaps the most important aspect of the Chinese food culture is the importance of food itself in Chinese culture. That Chinese cuisine is the greatest in the world is highly debatable and is essentially irrelevant. But few can take exception to the statement that few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese. And this orientation appears to be as ancient as Chinese culture itself. According to Lun yu (Confucian Analects, chap. "Wei Ling Kung"), when the duke Ling of Wei asked Confucius (551-479 B.C.) about military tactics, Confucius replied, "I have indeed heard about matters pertaining to tsu (meat stand) and tou (meat platter), but I have not learned military matters." Indeed, perhaps one of the most important qualifications of a Chinese gentleman was his knowledge and skill pertaining to food and drink. . . . The importance of the kitchen in the king's palace is amply shown in the personnel roster recorded in Chou li. Out of the almost four thousand persons who had the responsibility of running the king's residential quarters, 2,271, or almost 60 percent, of them handled food and wine.  
  
What these specialists tended to were not just the king's palate pleasures: eating was also very serious business. In I li, the book that describes various ceremonies, food cannot be separated from ritual. . . . [In] Zhou texts [12th century B.C.E. - 221 B.C.E.] references were made of the use of the ding cauldron, a cooking vessel, as the prime symbol of the state. I cannot feel more confident to say that the ancient Chinese were among the peoples of the world who have been particularly preoccupied with food and eating. Furthermore, as Jacques Gernet has stated, "there is no doubt that in this sphere China has shown a greater inventiveness than any other civilization."2

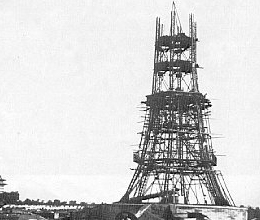
1. Inventions

**Paper currency:**

**Row crops:**

Crops were first planted in rows around sixth century BC, which allows them to grow faster and larger. In addition, the wind will hit the perfectly straight rows and roll gently through.

**Deep drilling for gas:**



A technique developed in 100 BC is still used today, known as deep drilling for gas. The devices that were used were remarkably large and well crafted for the time. This technique has given many Americans jobs in the past and present, and is responsible for a considerable amount of America’s income.

**Fireworks:**

Fireworks were invented by the Chinese as entertainment, but were later used to scare off enemies in times of war. Today, we use fireworks to celebrate our independence. It is cool that this seventeenth century BC technique is still practiced and enjoyed today.

**Gun powder:**

Gun powder wasn’t designed first for war uses, but as elixir for immortality. Unfortunately for the Chinese, the only thing that gun powder did was explode. The invention of this made wars less gruesome and painful. Instead of dying slowly by a fatal sword wound, a shot takes toll immediately. Imagine, an America where all the soldiers bear swords… Gun powder’s date is unknown, but it is assumed that it was invented around the same time as fireworks.

**Flame thrower:**



What pyromaniac nut invented this contraption!?! Invented in the tenth century BC, the flame thrower was a great invention that has a variation used widely today. A torch or welder (following the same basic principles of a flame thrower) is used to weld metals together, and is very important in building large sturdy structures.

**Parachute:**



Nothing like jumping off high objects, huh? I guess even the Chinese had to get their kicks somehow. The invention of the parachute is used widely today, both for recreational, and government uses. When important and sensitive satellites are entering the orbit, they are in a freefall, but once they get to a certain point they deploy a sturdy parachute to allow them to drift to the ground harmlessly. First documentation of the parachute was in 90 BC, but it is assumed to be around in second century BC.

**Rudder:**



The rudder helps with turning a boat or in recent years, a plane. Before the invention of the rudder, boats had to rely on oars to turn, which required a lot of unnecessary time and energy. Now, planes (which cannot be steered by oar) are possible, and are used widely for both recreational and work. It is unknown when the rudder was invented.

**The wheelbarrow:**



What would life be without the wheelbarrow? When working, you could carry 200+ of weight in a wheelbarrow, while you could only carry half of that. The Chinese’s building process was dramatically sped up because of this useful invention. The wheelbarrow emerged in first century BC.

**Compass:**



The compass is one of the most useful inventions by the Chinese, used widely in planes, boats, and in the wilderness to find direction. Many times when you lose your bearings, just consult the compass and you’re on your way. Invention date is unknown

1. Visual Arts

Calligraphy

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| **Calligraphy has remained a potent force in Chinese life up to the present. During the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, calligraphy continued to be a central  art of the literati, closely associated both with painting and with the social and cultural life of the educated elite.  The Chinese landscape came to reflect the appreciation of calligraphy, as stones inscribed with the calligraphy of admired artists were erected at famous sites.  Calligraphy could also be seen on temple name plaques, on shop signs, and on couplets pasted by the doors of even very modest homes.  Calligraphy, thus, formed an ever-present part of China's visual culture.** | | |
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| **During the twentieth century, the social and political uses of calligraphy have been radically changed.  Calligraphy is no longer an art associated primarily with the traditional scholarly elite.  Not only has calligraphy been employed as a tool of revolution, but it has become a popular amateur art practiced by people of all walks of life, and artists have found ways to use it to challenge traditions rather than perpetuate them.** | | |
| **Under Mao, words were frequently seen on the street displayed on banners or signs with revolutionary slogans.  Most of the time, the style used for revolutionary slogans was bold and  block-like, with no resemblance to calligraphy produced through use of the brush.**    **At workplaces, as seen below, prominent signs urged workers  to sustain their revolutionary ardor.**  ***How do you think the common sight of slogans like these would shape how people looked on calligraphy done with a brush?*** | | |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | **1969 rally urging resistance against American imperialism****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cpredfg.htm)** | | | | |
| http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cpfacty.jpg | | http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cpwkbnr.jpg |
| |  | | --- | | **Workshop decorated with banner proclaiming "Under no conditions forget class struggle!"****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cpwkbnr.htm)** | |
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| **Even if block-like calligraphy had revolutionary overtones, Mao and other leading revolutionaries wrote in styles much closer to traditional calligraphy.  Moreover, even after most people took up writing with pencils and ball-point pens, leading party members continued to do calligraphy with traditional brushes.  They would give away pieces of their calligraphy and allowed their calligraphy to be widely displayed.** | | |
| **Mao was not only a calligrapher, but also a poet.  Below is the first part of a poem he wrote in response to a poem sent to him by the literary figure, Guo Moruo.  The poem extols revolutionary action, but uses traditional poetic forms.**  **http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7crmaopo.jpg** | | |
| |  | | --- | | **Mao's poem, "Reply to Guo Moruo, to the tune of Man jiang hong"****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7crmaopo.htm)** | | | |
| **For other political leaders' calligraphy,**[**click here**](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7callead.htm)**.** | | |
| http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cphall2.jpg**Mao Zedong's calligraphy was more widely displayed than that of any other leader.  The poem shown above is used, at right, to decorate the memorial hall dedicated to Mao the year after his death.** | | |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | **Mao's calligraphy in the Mao Mausoleum****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cphall2.htm)** | | | | |
| **Leaders, beginning with Mao, but continuing to the present, liked to be photographed doing calligraphy or making gifts of it.** | | |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cpmaowg.jpg** | **http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cphuawg.jpg** | | |  | | --- | | **Mao writing in the 1940s****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cpmaowg.htm)** | | |  | | --- | | **Hua Guofeng writing in the late 1970s****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cphuawg.htm)** | | |  |  | | | |
| http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cdjzm.jpg**In 2001 China's premier Jiang Zemin had himself photographed conferring an inscription in his own calligraphy to a society he wanted to support.**    ***What do you think a political leader has to gain from publication of a picture like this?*** | | |
| |  | | --- | | **Jiang Zemin presenting his calligraphy to a society in 2001****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7cdjzm.htm)** | | | |
| http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7pbeboai.jpg  **One also can still see calligraphy by earlier political leaders in China today.  This inscription proclaiming the Confucian virtue of broad love is in the hand of Sun Yat-sen.** | | |
| |  | | --- | | **Inscription by Sun Yat-sen in Shanxi province****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7pbeboai.htm)** | | | |
| **There is still work today for calligraphers and a substantial market for calligraphy scrolls produced in the traditional manner. Many art schools now have professors of calligraphy training calligrapher-artists.  Considerably less well paid are calligraphers who produce calligraphy for signs and door frames.  Nevertheless, this sort of calligraphy continues to form a significant part of everyday visual culture.** | | |
| http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7pbedoor.jpg**The entrance to this house has not only the character for "blessings" cut into the brick (visible behind the bicycle) and a four character phrase above the entrance but also two temporary paper strips on either side of the door.  The phrase across the top reads "auspicious stars shine on high."  The paper strip hanging down the right side reads "The two characters 'peace' and 'calm' are worth a thousand in gold."  The one on the left reads "When harmony and obedience fill the home it adds a hundred blessings."**    ***Do you think whoever put up these characters cared about their calligraphy?  If the auspicious meanings were legibly represented, would that have been enough?*** | | |
| |  | | --- | | **Doorway, Shanxi province, 2001****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7pbedoor.htm)** | | | |
| http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7pbestor.jpg**Stores, of course, also have signs announcing their names and products.**    ***Do some of the characters on these store signs seem more calligraphic than others?  What makes them different?*** | | |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | **Cosmetics shop, Shanxi 2001****[source](http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/callig/7pbestor.htm)** | | | | |
|  | | |